You may know that sheep were the most important domestic animals in the ancient Near East, including Palestine. You probably have heard a lot of language about sheep, shepherds and shepherding throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (as well, of course, as in the New Testament). Given that, you probably wouldn’t be surprised to learn that many ancient peoples referred to their deities as “shepherds”. The ancient Hebrews were no exception, and Psalm 23 in a prime example of that. And, as an extension of a divine shepherding, many of those same ancient peoples ascribed the title of “shepherd” to their kings and princes.

But in this context, the Hebrews WERE an exception. We don’t often hear these passages—and clergy often squirm when they are read—but the Hebrew Bible normally applied the title to Israel’s leaders in a negative way. God was understood as Israel’s true shepherd, but God’s subordinate herdsmen often fell short of their Shepherd’s standards, and were condemned for stupidity and mismanagement. Jeremiah prophesied to the leaders of his time: “Watch out, you shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the LORD. This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, proclaims about the shepherds who “tend to” my people: You are the ones who have scattered my flock and driven them away. You haven’t attended to their needs” (23.1-2). And “My people were lost sheep; their shepherds led them astray; they deserted them on the mountains, where they wandered off among the hills, forgetting their resting place” (50.6). Similarly, Ezekiel prophesied: “So now shepherds, hear the LORD’s word! This is what the LORD God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn’t seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn’t tend my flock” (34.7).

What is suggested in these passages, too, was the willingness of the sheep to follow even bad shepherds. With out any shepherd, bad or good, the people became lost, or subject to being scattered at a moment’s notice—so any security was better than none. Other stories throughout scriptures—just think of the incident of the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai! (Ex 32.1-10)—point to the people’s willingness to follow, or even create, any leader who might allay their fears . . . even if that “so-called” leader points them in the wrong direction. And, my suspicion is that none of those “shepherds” knew their sheep by name.

Those stories, that history, provides the a backdrop for our “Good Shepherd Sunday” and its lessons—traditionally, this fourth Sunday of Easter. Those “bad”
shepherds of Israel’s antiquity became, in the minds and pens of the Gospel writers, the political and religious leaders of the New Testament period. And John really played on this distinction. In stark contrast to the corrupt and inattentive “shepherds” of Jeremiah and Ezekiel—and, by extension, the Jewish leaders of his day, in John’s Gospel, Jesus asserts that he is the Good Shepherd, and that he knows all of his sheep by name (10.3). All of his sheep by name.

Think about that for a moment: Jesus knows your name. When you came through this door this morning, you came as a member of Jesus’s flock . . . and Jesus knows his sheep by name—so wrote John, and reasserted in our Collect. He knows you, warts and all. You moms (and dads) know your children by name . . . but not only that. Those names, when spoken, conjure up personality traits, habits, fears, joys, and so much more. All of us experience the same thing when we hear the name of our friends, or our beloved. And Jesus knows our names — the names of all of his sheep . . . and so much more.

Think about that for a moment. On the one hand, it’s quite empowering, encouraging, and/or comforting. In our times of deepest need, we trust that God cares for us in ways that are very individualized; we have faith that God interacts with us in ways that defy “One size fits all”. On the other hand, it’s also pretty frightening. And I don’t mean “God sees us when we’re sleeping. God knows when we’re awake. God knows when we’ve been bad or good, so be good, for goodness sake”. Thank God that God is not Santa Claus! Yet God, knowing us by name, knows our fears, our habits, our strengths, our commitments, but also our potential; we can be summoned to go where we might fear to tread.

Scripture teaches us this ALL of the time. Last Sunday, I commented on one story about Peter, and how God saw more in him than others did . . . or possibly even he himself did. Elsewhere in Acts, Jesus called Simon—re-named “Peter”—to follow his Shepherd’s lead into confrontation with the authorities, authorities more committed to maintaining both their own power and the status quo rather than the greater welfare of their citizens. You have to imagine that Peter wondered, “Can I do this?” And he did; he preached so powerfully and convincingly that thousands believed that his message offered more hope than that of the establishment. And then, as we just heard, Jesus called Peter to a place of death and mourning, into the house of Dorcas, also called “Tabitha”. And Jesus knew that Peter was equipped to call Dorcas to life renewed. Many others saw, and believed, that Jesus knew Tabitha’s name and called her to further witness.

Aside from being a prime example of Yahweh being Israel’s Shepherd, Psalm 23 is a summons to us—as individual sheep, called by our names—to trust in that Shepherd’s protection. I am bid to allow God to revive me, to feed me—to trust that I will not be in
want. But the psalm is not just about comfort; it not just about laying down in green pastures. It is about confidence in the Shepherd. It recognizes that I will find myself in times of hardship—in valleys of death; it recognizes that I will find myself in the presence of an enemy. But it promises that I am not alone; even in those hard times, I am upheld, empowered, by the Shepherd’s “rod” and “staff”. Even then and there, I am fed.

Today, we are reminded that Jesus—the Good Shepherd—know us and calls us—his beloved sheep—by name. His will, according to John’s Gospel (a few verses prior to our reading), is that his sheep will have life and have it abundantly (10.10). And his command to his sheep—stated over and over throughout John’s writings—is that they love one another as the Shepherd loved them . . . loved us (15.12). Living in the hope of abundant life, living in that love, then, his sheep will hear the Shepherd’s call, and follow him (10.4). He bids his sheep to follow him. This is where things get challenging . . . because Jesus knows our names. He knows our fears, our habits, our strengths, our commitments, and also our potential.

How we will follow? I’ve spoken over the last few months of the challenges facing this congregation as we move through our “Season of Discovery” in the Priest-in-Charge process. We are drawing near to having a fairly good understanding of where we’ve been, and who we are now. That “research phase” should be wrapped up in the next few weeks, and we’ll embark on putting together a summary picture of what this corporate “sheep” looks like. That’s great! But where does that sheep—this congregation—then follow the Shepherd’s lead in offering abundant life to the world around us? That is the probing question facing us as a flock.

But we have hard questions to answer individually as well. Questions that have been brought to the fore in the last week as two more young people have died, and others have been injured, at the hands of others in our neighborhoods. “Reasons” for why those deaths have occurred are flying around, competing for attention and pride-of-place. I’m not going to name them; you all know what is being put forward. And I’m not going to re-visit the question of “Why?” these tragedies have occurred (I addressed that issue last week as well, and there are copies of that sermon in the narthex and on line).

No, I’m going to stick with the theme of today: Jesus know his sheep by name, and calls them to follow him. Jesus knows you . . . knows me . . . knows us . . . each of us. Jesus knows what are our strengths, what are our passions. And, yes, what are our fears. But he bids his sheep follow him . . . and our belief is that we are to follow him to ensure that ALL have life and have it abundantly. To do that, we cannot remain in our “green pastures”, or take comfort “beside still waters”. There are times when the Shepherd accompanies us into the “valley of the shadow of death”. Jesus calls us individually to that work. He knows that we will approach it differently, given our different personalities—but he expects us to do something.
As I mentioned before, when we came through these doors this morning, we became members of Jesus’ flock. We came into a place defined by the Baptismal Covenant wherein we promised to “persevere in resisting evil”, to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ”, “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves” and that we would “strive for justice and peace among all people” (BCP, 304-5). Yes, in this place we find comfort, we find hope. But, often, when we look out from here, when we go out from here, we are in the midst of the opposite: we see discord, violence and hopelessness.

As sheep, known to the Good Shepherd by name, and called to follow Him, we have to grapple—each one of us—with the hard question of how to respond with hope in a hopeless world. And “response” is not arguing, not debating, not pointing fingers, and not doubling down in our echo chambers. Response is none of these things without action. We may not be called to preach to power like Peter; that was how the Shepherd called him. But we are not called to be passive. It’s frightening that Jesus knows our potential; he summons us to live into it.

The Good Shepherd calls us each by name to follow him. It is up to us. I will close with an edited versions of a poem/prayer by St. Teresa of Avila that some of you may have heard recently:

The Good Shepherd has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
The Good Shepherd has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
The Good Shepherd has no body now on earth but yours. (Christ Has No Body)

Amen.